

Book Reviews

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The Cult of the Expert

Hamish Hamilton, London, 1982, 194 pages, £5.95

This book is a humorous, pungent attack on the way in which our obedience to the views of so-called Experts in every walk of life is both idiotic and is leading to a decline in the standards of society.

The experts who are attacked are those who blind us with science, who confuse us with jargon and intimidate us with an air of superiority. The book itself shows how the experts have emerged and the influence they have had. These have led to the emergence of fashions in scientific research and belief, in changes in education processes and in obscurity of language.

So much of what the author says rings a bell which sounds uncomfortably in the ears of OR Scientists and indeed one of the examples of obscurity is an extract from a paper by a British OR Scientist. The chapters on the rise of fashions in scientific research and methodology should also cause discomfort to us all. For OR has been rich in fashion, often followed in a fairly meaningless way. For who can recall, without blushing, the enthusiasm for critical path, business games, planned programme and budgeting systems, management by objectives, quality and reliability? These were all buzz words of the last decade. Where are they now? And where in ten years time will be our current fashions of systems analysis and the microcomputer?

Of particular interest to us in OR is the discussion of innovation. Many examples are given of innovation by the non-specialist. The transistor was invented using apparatus costing less than £100. Tape recording was invented by a Danish telephone engineer working in the evenings. The cyclotron was not invented in a huge laboratory; there was an ordinary kitchen chair on top of a physics work bench. Between two poles on either side, wire was looped around the kitchen chair on

the seat of which was an object about the size of a pie made of window glass, sealing wax and brass.

The first photo typesetter was developed by two telephone engineers working in their own homes. The hovercraft was developed from two coffee tins and a hair dryer and a pair of kitchen scales. Photocopying was developed by a patents lawyer, plastics by a chemist in a barn, kodachrome by two professional pianists, the ballpoint pen by an artist, the gyro compass by an art historian and the safety razor by a travelling salesman in bottle stoppers.

What is the lesson for us? Surely OR as an *interdisciplinary* subject was created exactly in this innovative image? But is this any longer so? We have university courses which specifically set out to create the *discipline* of OR and we have lost almost completely the cross fertilization and serendipity of lateral leaps of imagination.

So in this book there is much to learn and ponder. Perhaps some of it is shallow and journalistic but there is enough evidence here to make us all look at ourselves more closely.

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Developing Managerial Skills in Engineers and Scientists: Succeeding as a Technical Manager

Van Nostrand Reinhold Series in: Managerial Skill Development in Engineering and Science, Van Nostrand Reinhold, New York, 1982, xiv + 368 pages, £25.10

Present-day technical education tends to over-develop analytical skills while managerial skills remain highly underdeveloped. On the other hand it is common practice to use technical competence as a criterion for promotions to managerial positions. This book is addressed to engineers, scientists, technical executives, supervisors, managers and students of engineering, and it is intended to

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